



POST-COLONIAL DILEMMAS IN THE NOVELS OF JHUMPA LAHIRI

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ABSTRACT

The *Namesake* is about this perpetual dilemma faced by immigrants in the form of Ashima, Ashok Ganguli as they struggle to maintain their identities while trying to shake them off at the same time. The first generation's story was about adaptation, learning, culturing, and discovering new things about themselves. The second generation of Gogol, Sonia... find itself presented with two conflicting realities and cultures and sets of expectations - one of the host countries through the socio-cultural surroundings and the other of the home country through their parents. Her next novel *The Lowland* is the most ambitious book, in which she moves out of her comfort zone- the academic world of New England and plunges into a controversial chapter of recent Indian history- the Naxalite movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Lahiri has broadened her novel begins in the land left behind-0 Bengal-during the turbulent decades when Naxalites destabilized the state. The Lowland starts with snippets of the shared life experiences of two teenage brothers Subhash and Udayan. Born fifteen months apart, these children of Bengali parents settled in Calcutta are immensely friendly with each other.

KEY WORDS: dilemma, immigrants, destabilized, *Namesake*, The Lowland, socio-cultural.

INTRODUCTION:

The present paper is an effort to understand the conflicts before the second generation of Indian Diaspora with special reference to *The Namesake* by Jhumpa Lahiri. Having been born of educated middle class Bengali parents in London and grown up in Rhodes Island, Lahiri authentically portrays her diasporic experiences in her first novel *The Namesake*.

In this novel Lahiri's experiences of growing up as a child of immigrants resemble that of her protagonist, Gogol Ganguly. Lahiri belongs to the second generation of Indian Diaspora whose ongoing quest for identity never seems to end. They feel

Sandwiched between the country of their parents and the country of their birth. They are to maintain ties between the ideologies of these two countries, which are poles apart. But in this process they are caught between acute identity crisis from where there is nowhere to go. Lahiri finds herself quite a stranger to both of the countries - in India she is an American and in America, she is an Indian.

Post-colonial Dilemmas: Post-colonial literature has emerged as a genre of contemporary history, post-colonialism questions and reinvents the modes of cultural perception. It studies the residual effects of social, political and cultural aspects. Post-colonial literature, wherein writers articulate and celebrate the post-colonial identity of the decolonized, native society ,whilst the independent nations pragmatic connections with the mother country. Dilemma is a situation in which a difficult situation has to be made between two or more alternatives especially ones that are equally undesirable.

INTERPRETATION AND DISCUSSION:

Perpetual Dilemma

The *Namesake* is about this perpetual dilemma faced by immigrants as they struggle to maintain their identities while trying to shake them off at the same time. "The first generation's story was about adaptation and learning a culturing and also discovering new things about themselves. The second generation finds itself presented with two conflicting realities and cultures and sets of expectations - one of the host countries through the socio-cultural surroundings and the other of the home country through their parents." (Batra 50)

Parents talk of shared history, which stresses oneness. But cultural identity lies not only in oneness but in "critical points of deep and significant difference which constitute what we really are; or rather – since history has intervened – what we have become." (Hall 112)

Gogol's Identity Crisis

Through Gogol, Lahiri presents identity crisis, which she herself has faced acutely. She contradicts the idiom "What's in a name?" Rather she is obsessed with 'it's everything that matters in a name.' Name signifies the first identity. But this identity gets a blow when it comes to the second generation of Indian Diaspora. The paper intends to explore the conflicts which arise due to different cultural practices before the children of Indian parentage.

Jhumpa Lahiri was born as Nilanjana Sudeshna, but had one pet name, Jhumpa which was found easy to pronounce by her teacher and she became Jhumpa

Lahiri. She felt embarrassed whenever she was called as Jhumpa. She struggled a lot to make herself feel an American but she found just a halfway feeling. The same feeling she puts into Gogol who never likes to be called by this name. The agony felt by Gogol is the agony of Jhumpa Lahiri.

Lahiri's parents, like the whole first generation of Diaspora, were always isolated from mainstream American Culture. Despite the fact that they spoke English, they were betrayed by their accent. They feel alone and aloof there. Lahiri has shown all this through various conflicts presented in *The Namesake*.

Gogol's name is one of the chief causes, which make him feel alienated. His loneliness starts from the moment he enters the world. His mother thinks to herself - "She has never known a person entering the world so alone" (Lahiri 24). For him, Gogol signifies a beginning and a survival. The name fills him with joy and indicates a new life. But this very name, the first identity of their son, is the very first factor which contributes to the problem of identity crisis. His name Gogol "sounds ludicrous to his ears, lacking dignity of gravity." (76) He does not want to read Nikolai Gogol because he thinks it "would mean paying tribute to his namesake, accepting it somehow" (92).

The Question of Identity

In the postcolonial discourse, the question of identity plays a vital role. The problem of Gogol's name symbolizes the problem of his identity. He wants to be connected to the strange names in the graveyard. He wants to relate himself with American milieu but his name hinders his way to be recognized as an American. Nikhil replaces Gogol when he enters Yale as a freshman. Here nobody knows his earlier name. He feels relief and confident. Here starts his transformation. He starts doing many activities, which he could not dare to do as Gogol. But a new dilemma encircles him. He changes his name but "he does not feel like Nikhil" (105). He fears to be discovered. With the rejection of Gogol's name, Lahiri rejects the immigrant identity nurtured by his parents. But this outward change fails to give him inner satisfaction. "After eighteen years of Gogol, two months of Nikhil feels scant, inconsequential." (105) He hates everything that reminds him of his past and heritage.

Effort at Blending in – Leading Nowhere

Gogol desires to blend in the American society. He wants to live unnoticed. But he is not viewed as an American by other Americans, even though he is a native born citizen. He tries to put a wall between his past and his present but it is not easy. The adoption of 'Nikhil' is a part to live only in the present, but the ghost of Gogol clings to him that he signs his old name unconsciously, he does not respond immediately when he is addressed as Nikhil. He tries to become an entirely different person from what really he is.

Gogol struggles to carry the burden of two names. Nikhil resembles American names, yet 'Gogol' and his past follow him everywhere. He experiences a feeling of being in-between. He is considered an 'ABCD' "America-Born Confused Desi" But he considers himself an American. American society says, "But you're Indian" (157).

Gogol is an outsider in American society whereas he does not feel intimacy with Indianess. So 'who he is' becomes a great problem. What determines identity? Is

it the name, which can be the very first factor in the formation? Even after making all efforts to erase his past, his failure to assert his identity is seen in his relationship with women. He does not want Ruth or Maxine to meet his parents. Such efforts are made to escape his past identity and heritage. The death of his father brings great change in him. He learns that he cannot abandon or diminish the importance of either culture but must learn to mesh. He realizes that his identity is embellished by both cultures and comes to know "identity as a production, which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside representation" (Hall 10). He actively participates in the formation of his new and ever-widening identification. Thus, it is not the name only, which determines identity. Cultural hybridism is the other aspect, which has a telling effect on his identity. He belongs to many cultures at once and identity may not be determined by national boundaries only. As locations change, identity can also change. One must not be excessively obsessed with one's cultural legacy, because it is not something meaningless; rather, it is deep rooted in one's collective psyche.

Postcolonial Dilemmas in The Lowland

The novel, 'The Lowland' starts with snippets of the shared life experiences of two teenage brothers Subhash and Udayan. Born fifteen months apart, these children of Bengali parents settled in Calcutta are immensely friendly with each other. Their various peccadilloes like transgressing the bounds of an elite club to steal a golf ball or watching glamorous actresses at the film studio are realistically portrayed. Both the children are interested in science and conduct experiments at home. As they grow up, Udayan, the impulsive and somewhat troublesome child for parents, feels attracted towards Naxalism- a brand of communism inspired by Mao-tse Tung of China-which preached a violent end of capitalist class. So committed is Udayan to the ideology that he would risk all his married life, his pregnant wife, his brother and parents – to work for the party. However, Subhash is not interested in this ideology. Even when his brother takes him to attend meetings, he feels ill at ease and remains politically inactive.

Gauri is the female protagonist in the novel. She comes in contact with Udayan through her brother Manash. Their house is near the college where Udayan is studying Physics. Subhash, on the other hand, goes to the Rhode Island in USA to study Chemistry. Rhode Island incidentally is the area where the writer Jhumpa Lahiri spent most of her unmarried life. The novelty of the place, lifestyle and culture overwhelm Subhash and he fails to find any linkage between what he finds in his host country and back home in the country of his birth. He comes to India after learning about the killing of his brother at the hands of police. It is here that Subhash thinks seriously about re-settling Udayan's wife Gauri. Much against the wishes of his parents, he marries Gauri and takes her to the States to usher her into a new life. (p.186). He believes that she would be able to forget Udayan's tragedy and find meaning in life.

He had to assure her that he would not go against her wishes and that she would be free to lead her own kind of life. In the USA, bringing her round to a wife's ways was a painfully long, and finally an unsuccessful affair. The part of the story dealing with Gauri's life in America is a journey from her silent, inchoate state to an Americanized libertine. What it misses is the signpost of Subhash's wife, the train seems to have sped past this station. Finally, when they are able to unite physically, it is almost a one sided affair and Gauri's response remains uncertain. Later, she plunges her-self into study of philosophy rather than taking up any radical role of a political activist as Udayan had been. She has a rather single-track mind that remains obsessed with academics to the extent that she forsakes her daughter from Udayan. Her study of philosophy also does not centre around Marxism; it is abstract philosophical musing about mind, time that she seeks to master, and teach to her students.

The novel, however, does not only record Gauri's escapism into a thoroughly academic world, it also shows Udayan's daughter's incapacity for feelings of love and concern. It is ostensibly explained as resulting from a motherless lot that she had to face when Gauri suddenly walked out on her second husband one day leaving behind her child from her first husband. The novelist does not give the reader a glimpse into her consciousness. Her thinking is interpreted by the writer. The objective third person narrative has its plus points but when a psychological issue of this type is under scanner, the intimate inscape portrayal of the character involved in the form of interior monologue becomes a necessity. As it is one has to gather it all from Gauri's tangible actions only.

Subhash, on the other hand, devoted himself whole-heartedly to bringing up Bela, playing the dual roles of mother and father to her. That the novelist intends flinging upon the unsuspecting reader something of a puzzle intentionally seems a possibility. When Bela wants a babysitter for her daughter, Subhash disagrees; he would rather himself look after her. Gauri's reaction is to be noted here:

"And so she felt antagonized by a man who did nothing to antagonize her, and by Bela, who did not even know the meaning of the word." (p.164)

This again is a quizzical streak in Gauri's character.

Gauri, it would be seen, was unemotional, as when Bela threw tantrum one day and would not go to school. She grasped her hand tightly and dragged her to the school bus. It is suggested that the bloody scenes of Calcutta had steeled her:

"I watched your father killed before my eyes, she might have said" (170).

Is it the same callousness that enables her to walk over her husband? If yes, then it sits ill with her touted emotional attachment with her dead husband. She was least bothered about Subhash's sensitivity when she decided to give herself a new look. On the other hand, on seeing a middle-aged man, she feels attracted which shows her lack of moral scruples – something indicated as the reason for her lack of union with Subhash, who had done so much for her.

Gauri wanted to be independent. For that matter, she started leaving Bela for a short jaunt to the store round the corner. This short furlough expanded to many minutes of absence from home, leaving child Bela to fend for herself. When Subhash found her missing one day, he was shaken and 'it took Subhash, who was standing at the window, his back to the room, several minutes before he turned around' (175). He could sense the insensitivity in Gauri's character. 'The wide berth for herself that she had been seeking in their marriage, he now willingly gave. He no longer wanted to touch her in bed, he no longer brought up the possibility of a second child', (176). The gulf between the two was now widening fast.

Opposed to Gauri, Bela is an intellectual type who would use knowledge for the betterment of the marginalized people. She had done her major in environmental science and her senior thesis was on the effect of pesticide in a local river. Instead of studying further at the graduate level, she chooses her own path. She rejects, like her father Udayan did, a comfortable family life. Instead, at twenty-one she joins the Peace Corps. She works on the farm-irrigating field, harvesting crop, cleaning animal pens etc. She moves from one farm to another across different states in America. She does not mind if she is paid a pittance or just provided food and shelter as compensation. She is virtually a nomad but when she visits home, she tries to apply green technology to areas of daily life.

By the time Bela is thirty three and Subhash sixty years old, Gauri visits her abandoned family. The same something unexplained in the novel – that had flooded her veins was permanent. She would never be free from that. Ultimately, she had come seeking Bela. She would come to ask about Bela's life, to ask Subhash if she might contact her now. To ask if there was a phone number, an address to which she might write. To ask if Bela might be open to this, before it was too late. (360-7). In Subhash, Gauri hoped to see an old version of her dead first husband Udayan now.

Subhash was away with Elise for a walk. Meghna, Bela's young daughter was there along with her mother who was doing household chores. As expected, she got a mouthful from Bela. It was the encounter of two women who fiercely guarded their freedom, which meant self-sufficiency, meaning as much truck with fellow beings as was adequate for self-fulfillment and sexual satisfaction. The difference existed in that whereas Bela had chosen a vocation which directly served the downtrodden and the marginalized, Gauri had grown into a smug intellectual given to academic pursuits. Bela could appreciate parental emotions and desired to give to her daughter the same care and love which she had got from her father, in the absence of her mother.

Therefore, as Gauri entered, the first salvo fired by Bela was a poser. "Why have you come here?" (312) and asked her to get out! Gauri did try to explain but Bela would have none of it. She said she knew about Udayan, meaning she did not find the reason of Gauri's callousness following Udayan's death a substantial excuse. "You're not my mother. You are nothing," she told her mother and added, "You're as dead to me as he is" (312-13).

The dilemma in the life of Subhash, Gauri and Bela are the post-colonial dilemmas because they faced it after their settlement in life. Even the problems of Ashima, Ashok, Gogol are the post- colonial dilemmas of the immigrants – Indo-Americans.

Purpose of Study: The study of post-colonial dilemmas is helpful for the immigrants and emigrants to have better understanding of post- colonial dilemmas due to their policies to earn more and lead standard life. This paper may bring some changes in their thinking of immigration or emigration. It may also play an important role in the development of their positive attitudes to understand and to overcome such post-colonial dilemmas in their life.. Even the govt.of a particular country may start taking steps to think over this global issue.

In a nutshell, "Fanon argued that the first step for 'colonised' people in finding a voice and an identity is to reclaim their own past" (Barry 193). Identity is not just who I am. It is not all about certain sex, race, age, job and family. These words just provide a framework within which one exists. Identity is not stable and unitary rather it is multiple and ever- widening. It is the past only, with which the present paper prepares a way to the future.

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